

Contributions

THE MISSION OF THE BRETHREN CHURCH

J. L. GILLIN

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Christianity is not only a set of propositions, a theory and philosophy of life, it is preeminently a life. In the first days of the church it was called "the way." To the apostles in the common prison the angel of the Lord said, "Go, stand and speak in the temple all the words of *this life*." And Jesus himself said of the purpose of his coming, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." The first century of Christian history was a time of most wonderful growth of "this way" in the face of the bitterest opposition from both Jew and Roman. And to the purity, the zeal, the aggressiveness and the faith of the Apostolic church we may well look back with longing to emulate its conquests, to be inspired by its humble faithfulness and its devotion to Christ in the face of the most shameful and horrible death, and to learn, if we may, the secret of its brotherhood which made it so unique in the eyes of the wondering world. And despite the fact that some decry the modern tendency to go back to Christ, we believe that going back to Christ and the ideals and purposes of the Apostolic church will be the regeneration of modern society. Of course there is a development in man's apprehension of Christ's ideas, but beyond Christ we shall never get, and beyond the earnestness, the zeal, the self-sacrifice and love of the early church we can scarcely hope to go.

But perhaps I ought to tell you how the Brethren church arose; that you may view it historically. About the year 1708 Alexander Mack of Schwartzenan, Germany, and a few friends were led by a diligent study of the Bible, church history, and the early Christian Fathers to the conclusion that the church had gradually fallen from its early purity of doctrine and life, and that the Lutheran Reformation had been only a partial recovery of early teaching and life. As a result of their study they were led to adopt anti-paedobaptist views and other beliefs which they thought were held by the early church, and which they believed contributed somewhat to the character of the life lived by the primitive Christians. And while they believed that life was what Jesus came to give, they understood that this life is dependent on the proper beliefs. Among these strange views, as men then thought, were these, that baptism could be performed in accordance with scripture and the practice of the church of the apostles only by immersion, and that a three-fold immersion;

that feet washing as described by John in the 13th chapter of his gospel is an ordinance meant by Christ to be literally observed by disciples in all the centuries; that the Lord's Supper is not only the bread and wine, but also an *agape* or *love feast*, as practiced by the primitive church, which concluded with the communion of the bread and wine. The state church of Germany, itself once the persecuted, now turned persecutor, and drove these Brethren from their native land to Holland, previous to their emigration to America almost a century before, the home of the Puritans also. Thence, the Brethren emigrated to Germantown, Pa., whence they have spread westward wherever the Pennsylvania people have gone and now have churches in almost every state of the Union. They are most numerous in the states of Pennsylvania, Indiana, Ohio, Maryland and Virginia. Of course I mean to speak of the three branches when I say they have churches in almost every state. This three-fold division occurred about 1881 on the questions of dress and manner of government. These three divisions are known as Old Order Brethren, Conservative or German Baptist Brethren, and Progressive Brethren. Of the latter your servant has the honor to be a member and a minister.

Now, as to her mission. In common with all churches the Brethren accepts as her mission the accomplishment of Christ's last command. Standing on the sun-kissed hills of Bethany with his disciples on that memorable Ascension Day almost nineteen hundred years ago Jesus said, as he lifted up his hands in blessing over them, "All power is given unto me in heaven and on earth. Go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age." She believes that on the doing of all these things is conditioned the promise with which he closed, "And lo, I am with you always."

The Brethren church believes that in carrying out the first part of this command, "Go teach all nations," it has too often been forgotten that Jesus also said "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you."

What, then, does the Brethren church conceive to be her special mission to the world; what is her excuse for an existence separate from others of the great churches of Christendom?

Like every other, she emphasizes some special doctrines. As lamentable as is the present multiplicity of denominations, there seems to be a philosophy in it which conduces to the glory of God and the magnifying of the truth. Each

emphasizes special doctrines, which are thus brought into the searching light of criticism. This I believe will end in the acknowledgement of what is true and the condemnation of the false and will result in the consequent enrichment of the body of Christian doctrine. And when the era passes in which churches fight each other—thank God it is passing—then each will be generous enough and broad-minded enough to see and adopt the good in the others. This adoption of whatever the Bible teaches, the recovery of those doctrines that were lost in the days when a false philosophy and a heathen government captured and corrupted the church, suppressed the truths which were obnoxious to its sinfulness, and grafted upon it notions and teachings borrowed from paganism to ponder to their own vain fancies—for this the Brethren church stands. She has no written creed but the Bible. This she accepts as interpreted and completed in the New Testament, as her only rule of faith and practice. Whatever the Bible teaches she professes to be willing to receive and practice. Whatever the Bible condemns or fails to teach when intelligently understood she professes to reject in both belief and life.

Hence, she is open to every new apprehension of the manifold revelation of God in Christ Jesus thru the Word.

Secondly, she contends for the plan of organization of the first churches under the apostles as best adapted to the needs of the church today. Hence, she believes in independent congregational government.

Further, she believes that the ordinances of the early church should be the ordinances of the modern church. And while she does not attach undue importance to ordinances she believes they were given by Christ for a great purpose, and the church cannot safely discard or change them. These ordinances, Christ-given and blessed as means of grace, she contends are means by which symbolically are taught to the disciples the great fundamental truths of Christianity. They are great acted parables, if I may use such an expression. Hence, the Brethren church believes it her duty to practice, and teach as Christian baptism, the earliest and only unquestioned mode of the church, which satisfies the facts of church history, the purpose of the symbol and teaches the great doctrine of the Trinity, viz., a triune immersion, "into the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Another ordinance of the primitive church, which we believe it our mission to revive, is the love feast or *agape*, which was the common meal eaten by the disciples together in the evening at certain times, after which the commun-